

Sermon For Rosh HaShanah Evening  
October 2, 2016 - 1 Tishri, 5777  
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton  
By Rabbi Dan Levin

There once was a man who visited a winery. He had been told that it was perhaps the most beautiful winery in the world. As he drove in, he passed by breathtaking rows of grape vines in the vineyard, and then to the stunning winery. As he drove in he was amazed to see the parking lot empty. The tasting room was exquisite - and yet also ... empty. The vintner greeted him and offered him a tour. He showed him the vineyards, his pristine operation, and took him into the cellar, where he saw row after row of the most beautiful, finely crafted barrels he had ever seen.

They returned to the tasting room and the vintner thanked him for the visit and turned to leave. "Aren't we going to have a tasting?" asked the man.

"Oh, we don't have any wine," said the vintner.

"How is that possible?" asked the man.

"Well," he said, "You see, I wanted to make the most beautiful winery in the world. I wanted it to be perfectly magnificent, so I spent all my time and energy in building our welcome center, designing our interiors, and crafting our cellar and our barrels. But I never learned how to make wine, so I have none to offer you."

This little parable seems absurd. Why go through the effort to build a winery if you have no intention of making wine? We might agree that what the winery looks like from the outside isn't really what's important.

Rabbi Weisman, our resident wine expert, told me that one of his favorite wineries in Santa Barbara is called Carhartt. The facility is unremarkable - it's a shack really. But the wine they have there is delicious - it's one of his favorites. The wine is made in an industrial facility - stainless steel, concrete, rubber hoses, not particularly attractive, but the vintner, whose name is Brooke Carhartt, doesn't care. Her interest is in making the best wine she possibly can, and she doesn't spend much energy thinking about the beauty of the vessels that will carry it.

Wine has a long history of symbolic value in Jewish tradition. The rabbis in the Talmud thought of wine as a symbol of wisdom. In the Pirke Avot, we read:

Rabbi Yossi bar Yehuda of Kefar HaBavli said: To what shall we compare someone who learns wisdom from the young? To someone who eats unripe grapes and drinks wine from his vat; and to what shall we compare someone who learns wisdom from the old? To someone who eats ripe grapes and drinks old wine.

But then, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi tells us something important: Do not look at the flask, but at what it contains. A new flask may contain old wine, but an old flask may not even contain new wine. (Avot 4:20)

To Rabbi Yehuda, it wasn't the vessel that was important, but what it contained. But is Rabbi Yossi wrong? Can we ignore the vessel in which that wine matures?

Last spring, I celebrated the 20th anniversary of my ordination as a rabbi and my 25<sup>th</sup> college reunion. As I watch my children mature and make their way into their own lives, I am conscious of the fact that I am no longer a new flask. My body doesn't recover as quickly as it once did from the bumps and bruises of a normal game of soccer, and I find myself reaching for names and for words that get lost in the jumble of my mind.

And so, I am proud to share with you, that I actually fulfilled one of my New Year's resolutions from last year: I started working out with a trainer - Joel. Joel is fantastic. He calls me "Mr. Dan Sir." He pushes me hard. He is the only person in the course of a week who will say: "Come on Mr. Dan Sir, be a warrior!" He has inspired me to take better care of my physical self, to eat better, to exercise more, and to get more fit and strong.

Krista Tippett, the well-known host of the NPR Radio program *On Being*, recently published a book titled *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into The Mystery and Art of Living*. There she writes, "We are matter, kindred with ocean and tree and sky. We are flesh and blood and bone ... I taste, touch, smell, see, and hear, and my mind entwines with my senses and experiences. I live and move and have my being ... therein I become."<sup>1</sup>

Watching the Olympic games this summer was like visiting a museum of the fine art of physical prowess. It's so inspiring to see these athletes perform at such a high level, to see how they have trained and honed their bodies to jump and twirl and run and swim higher and further and faster than anyone in the history of the world. But what's so interesting is that all of

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<sup>1</sup>Krista Tippett. *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*. New York: Penguin, 2016, pp. 57-58.

these athletes will tell you how their performance is so much more than the physical act we see. The grit and drive, concentration and determination to push oneself so far beyond the limits of what we imagine a person can do comes from a deeper place, a spiritual place, a place rooted deep within that drives us throughout the course of our lives to accomplish and to conquer all that we might aspire to achieve.

Too often, however, in our efforts to take ever better care of our bodies, we make fewer and fewer efforts to take care of our spirits. We as a society have become obsessed with the vessel. We spend an extraordinary amount of our time and our resources focused on building and maintaining our bodies. We spend enormous amounts of money making sure we look right - hair, body, skin, clothing. We kvetch constantly about how we look, obsessing over every pound we gain or lose, keeping up with the latest fashions and trends.

And without question, it's important. But at the same time we are out of balance. We spend much more time and energy taking care of our bodies than we do in taking care of our spirituality. There are times when it seems we are like vintners who are trying to build ever more beautiful wineries without focusing on the wine we make.

And the wine matters. What lies within matters. Our spirits and our souls require the same dedication and care as do the vessels that carry them.

But why do we neglect our spirits? Why do we refuse to take time to nurture our spirituality? Most of us take very little time to appreciate the arts, to learn wisdom, to be quiet and meditate and pray. We as a people grow further and further away from font of spiritual wisdom and energy that flows from Jewish tradition and Jewish practice. Many of us make it our priority to get to the gym a few days a week, but we come to services just a few times a year, and we take a class or come to Torah study ... well almost never.

We are blessed beyond measure - not simply because we have these wondrous bodies that give us so much capacity to navigate and experience our world; not simply because we have minds that can comprehend and analyze and judge and remember; and not even simply that we are blessed with a spirit that can love and feel and yearn. We are blessed because we have been given the gift of Torah - a gift that we, in our hubris and our arrogance, leave to collect dust tucked away on a bookshelf.

I want to take a moment to share with you a little Kabbalah - some wisdom from Jewish mystical tradition. It may seem a little deep, but let's go there together. In the Zohar, the

central book of Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism, Rabbi Shimon said, "Woe to the human being who says that the Torah presents mere stories and ordinary words!"<sup>2</sup> The Zohar teaches that the Torah comes from a place deep within the Holy One, from the root of the source of love and energy in the Universe, and thus is too powerful and precious to be revealed in its pure essence. To protect it, God covers it with garments, layers of protective corporeality so that it can exist for us in this world.

Think of a Torah scroll, like the ones we just saw in the ark moments ago. Each is covered with an exquisite garment, carefully crafted and suited to the individual scroll that lies within. But the garment, as beautiful as it is, is not the real Torah. There is more to find underneath that garment.

Underneath we find the panels of parchment, carefully sewn together and attached to the wooden spools, the Atzei Chayim, the trees of life that hold it together. But that is not the real Torah. Laid upon that parchment are the droplets of ink, meticulously drawn into 304,805 individual letters. Those letters represent yet another garment the Torah wears, the garment of human syntax and semantics, Hebrew, the holy language which captures those letters into 79,976 individual words.

Those words, like a bouquet of flowers, tell the stories of the five books of Moses. But these stories too, are but another garment, another layer covering what lies beneath.

"Come and see," says the Zohar. "the essence of the garment is the body that lies beneath, and the essence of the body is the soul."

The body of Torah, beneath the cover of stories and language, parchment, ink, and fabric, is the corpus of ideals, teachings, values and lessons, the commandments we are asked to follow. But within the body of Torah is a soul - the essential meaning that is found at the core of human experience, the awe and wonder, our competing compulsion for justice and compassion, our drive for knowledge and wisdom. And there, deep, deep within, is where we find that essential core of truth and love and holiness.

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And this is true for each one of us. Sitting here tonight each of us is covered with beautiful garments. But beneath those garments is our body, more essential than the garments it wears. And deep within is our soul, which truly makes us who we are.

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<sup>2</sup>Zohar 3:152a

I want you to think very carefully about yourself and think hard about who you really are. As important is the vessel that carries us, the real essence of who we are is not the vessel.

Who are you? In some sense, we are the physical beings seated together this evening. We are men and women, tall and short, large and small, old and not so old. Some of us have dark skin and some have light skin. Some of us have dark hair, some have light hair, some don't have any hair at all. But we are more than what we appear to be to each other.

Who are you? In some sense we are our talents and our abilities, our professional acumens and our hobbies and skills. We are teachers and nurses, lawyers and businesspeople, homemakers and breadwinners and students. We are athletes and card, knitters and crafts people, artists and musicians, talkers and readers.

Who are you? In some sense we are our ideas and our ideals, our thoughts and our opinions. We are democrats and republicans, libertarians and socialists and independents. We are rugged individualists and we are community-oriented collectivists. We value justice and fairness, compassion and kindness, knowledge and wisdom, freedom and peace. We think we should be prudent and conservative, save for the future and plan for "what if..." We scream "Carpe-Diem - seize the day!" and we explore our world and try new things.

Who are you? In some sense we are our personalities and ourselves. We are strong and we are soft. We are loud and we are quiet. We are extroverted and introverted. And deeper still. We are scared and we are confident. We doubt and we have faith. We have wounds and insecurities and fears. We have scars where we have healed, and we have pride in what we believe. We love, in some ways very deeply. We regret, and we feel shame. We yearn to be more whole, to be more secure, to be safe and serene.

Deep, deep, down. In the essence of who we are. When we peel away all the layers, all the garments that cover our truest selves ... what do we find? It's simple. We find beauty. We find a radiant, glorious, holy and blessed light that is so beautiful to behold that it reduces us to tears.

We don't often get to see that light. It takes so much effort to dig down deep inside and really try to use our minds to explore our spiritual essence. It takes enormous courage and faith and humanity to allow that light within us to be exposed to the world. And it takes an investment of time and energy to look for the light that shines inside those we love, with whom we share life's journey.

What would it look like if we could discover that inner being, and allow that light to shine in our outer selves? You know it when you see it - a person whose light is right there on the surface.

Years ago, a young man named Josh Marcus was Temple Beth El's star Ba'al Tekiah - our shofar blower. He was not much taller than the shofar, but from that small frame came a powerful sound. As Josh grew older, he never got very tall, but he did get very strong.

One day, after his first semester of law school, Josh was out with his brother in the ocean on a jet ski. They were towing a raft when suddenly they hit a wave. Josh fell into the water and felt a sharp pain in his left arm. When he looked down to see what was wrong, he saw that his left arm was missing. The rope from the raft had amputated his arm just below the shoulder.

His brother got him back to the jet ski and a nearby boat radioed in for help and they got Josh to the Trauma center. I will never forget seeing Josh the next day in the ICU - he looked up at me, and with the same twinkle in his eye that I had seen when he was a little boy said, "Well Rabbi Dan, I'm going to be the best one-armed lawyer they have ever seen."

Despite his catastrophic injury, Josh didn't miss a day of law school. From the love of family, friends, and community, he found an inner strength that far surpassed his muscular frame. He graduated law school, married Ms. Deborah Bogdanoff who grew up at Temple Beth El, and they just bought a home together a few minutes from here.

Josh's accident may have diminished his body, but his spirit is stronger than ever. To spend time with him is to see the light of his soul plastered all over his face.

When Moses returns from Mount Sinai, having spent so many hours in study with the Holy One, the book of Exodus relates that "Moses was not aware that his face was radiant from speaking with God." We too may find that if we invest ourselves in studying Torah, if we take the time to seek out the light that is found in our text and tradition, if we devote ourselves to building our spiritual core, we will build the inner strength we need to meet the challenges we face in our own lives, and we will find the wisdom and energy to make our spirits strong.

In the New Year, let us devote ourselves to exercising our spirituality in addition to our bodies. Let us apply more of our time, our energy, and our resources to building our spirits and nurturing our souls. Go to a concert, visit a museum, take

time to sit and meditate and pray. Make a resolution to keep Shabbat, to allow some time each week for sacred rest and quiet, prayer and meditation. And take some time for Torah. Hillel said, "Do not say I will study when I have leisure; you may never have that leisure." Make learning and study a priority - seek out the wisdom and energy of our sacred texts and tradition, for that wisdom, like good wine, will make this year a celebration of light and life. L'Chayim.